

**Testimony of Joe Kessler  
President of the Friends of Virgin Islands National Park**

**Concerning the “Virgin Islands National Park School Lease Act” (H.R. 53)**

**To US House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Insular Affairs**

**St. John, Virgin Islands  
July 9, 2007**

The Friends of Virgin Islands National Park (Friends) welcomes these field hearings on the proposed **Virgin Islands National Park School Lease Act (H. R. 53)** and we are pleased that you are here to hear from this community on the proposed legislation. We hope that these hearings and the ensuing discussions will help move resolution of this important issue forward.

As President of the Friends I testify before you representing the 3,612 members of this organization. About 20% of our members are from the Virgin Islands and we are also proud to have members hailing from all 50 states, as well as twelve foreign countries. Members of the Friends are bound together by our love for Virgin Islands National Park, our commitment to the preservation and protection of the natural and cultural resources of the Park, and our appreciation of what the Park means for St. John and all of the Virgin Islands.

Our appreciation is based on the conviction that because of VI National Park St. John is a world class tourist destination, a unique and safe place to live, and it enjoys considerable prosperity. St. John is a prosperous little island. Prosperous in the context of the Virgin Islands and prosperous in the context of the Caribbean:

- St. John has one of the highest per capita incomes in the Caribbean;
- St. John has the highest rate of private home ownership in the Caribbean; and,
- Just about anyone on St. John who wants a job can find one – particularly in the hospitality industry, with retail businesses, or in the building trades. Just witness the hundreds of people who arrive every morning from St. Thomas to work here.

We really have the Park to thank for this. In addition to the people of St. John -- it is the Park that makes this island so special! Furthermore, the Park is what drives the prosperity of this island; a 2004 study demonstrated that VI National Park generated more than \$127 million in annual sales and 2,500 jobs in the Virgin Islands.

Concerning the proposed Virgin Islands National Park School Lease Act (H. R. 53):

The Friends, along with nearly everyone on St. John, recognizes the absolute need to relocate the current schools from their current cramped, inappropriate and dangerous locations; and expand the facilities to include grades 10-12 so that the island's children do not have to leave St. John to attend public high school.

The need for new educational facilities is not in question – it is real, it is urgent, and must be made a high priority for the territorial government and this community. However, where to locate the new facility, what it should realistically include, how to build it, how to maintain it, and how to staff it are the real questions. These hearings address the key issue of the first question: how the required land for a new facility is to be acquired. We trust that the other issues will be dealt with in due course.

Prior to the introduction of H.R. 53, three alternatives to acquire land for a new educational facility were being considered:

- The VI Territorial Government would allocate land that it already owned;
- The VI Territorial Government would purchase sufficient land; and/or,
- The VI Territorial Government would swap land with the National Park Service.

However, as the territorial government does not own sufficient land on St. John and large parcels are generally difficult to find and prohibitively expensive if they were to be located, discussion centered on a land swap between the territorial government and the National Park Service.

The Friends has strongly supported the concept of the swap and we have played a key role in urging the National Park Service to be open and flexible in considering this possibility. This contributed to the NPS, in February 2003, providing the VI Government a list of properties (comprised of land on St. John, small uninhabited offshore islands and submerged lands) that in some combination could be considered in an exchange for land for a school within VI National Park. This list was not exclusive and was meant to initiate concrete discussions on the issue. This proposal has languished since then.

While we support swapping land we have fundamental concerns and misgivings about providing VI National Park land through some sort of long-term lease arrangement as proposed by this legislation.

Let's be frank; depending on the terms and conditions of a long-term lease, the arrangement is the *de facto* sale or gift of this property to the VI government and will result in the net loss of National Park property and resources. Clearly, this land will never revert to being parkland.

The National Park Service is in the “forever business”. It is legally mandated to: **“preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system [in this case, Virgin Islands National Park] for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations”**. Without question, this legislation would diminish, and therefore impair, the natural and cultural resources of VI National Park.

Furthermore, it will set a precedent that would in turn threaten national parks throughout the country. We wouldn't dream of selling off or giving away parts of Yosemite or Grand Canyon national parks, nor should we sell or give away a part of VI National Park. This

should not be given serious consideration, since there is a viable and preferable alternative.

An exchange, or swap, of land remains the most viable option as it is allowable under existing NPS policy and does not require any new authorizing legislation, and there are properties that the NPS would accept in such an exchange. In addition, an exchange could happen in a relatively short time, if there is the institutional and political will to make it a reality.

We appreciate and understand the concerns of some members of the community towards what is perceived as giving up additional lands to the NPS. Land is always an emotional issue and passion about land does not run any deeper than here in the Virgin Islands. However, the underlying principle of a land exchange, or swap, is that there is a “give” and a “get” – two pieces (or combination of pieces) of equally valued land are exchanged. Both parties give up something and both get an equal share back in return.

However, we must be clear: this is not a “win-win” situation. Aside from perhaps garnering some community goodwill and the satisfaction accrued from helping solve a community problem, the NPS has nothing to gain from a land swap – yet they are willing to go ahead with it. The only beneficiaries of a land exchange that will provide for a new school are the children of St. John. I suggest that we all look at the bigger picture and envision this island’s children growing up, learning, and playing in a modern educational facility located in a peaceful environment conducive to learning.

In conclusion, we reiterate our position that HR 53 is not in the best interests of the people of St. John, the American public in general, nor the National Park Service. H.R. 53 will diminish, and therefore impair, the natural and cultural resources of this beautiful national park; and, because of the precedent it sets, H.R. 53 threatens all national parks and Americans’ enjoyment of these natural, cultural and historic treasures.

Further we ask this subcommittee, and particularly it’s Chairwoman, to use your influence to encourage the VI Territorial Government and the National Park Service to enter into serious deliberations to exchange land for a school. The children of St. John deserve immediate and concerted efforts to resolve this impasse.

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to offer this testimony.